

## CHILDREN AND SAINTS

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NORBERT WENDELL, O.P.



HEY used to play handball against the wall of his room. It was enough to try the patience of Job himself. But he didn't mind. As a matter of fact usually it was he who got them started. When the neighbors remonstrated with them and tried to put an end to their unendurable noise, the boys would run to Philip Neri for protection. "Let them grumble as much as they like, my dear boys," he would say, "go on and be as merry as you like; all I want is that you should not sin against God." "If only I can keep them from sin," he once told a mystified Roman gentleman, "they are welcome to chop wood on my back."

That was St. Philip Neri's attitude toward children—nor was he an exception. All the Saints loved children. Indeed this must be so; for the Saints and the little ones of Christ are essentially kindred spirits. The saints of innocence are big children who have never grown up while the so called "sinner saints" are those who, following the advice of Our Lord, have once again become little children in order that they might enter the kingdom of heaven. Children, on the other hand (as long as they remain children in body and soul), what are they but little saints? although some of us in our more impatient moments are wont to refer to them as "little devils." Their purity, innocence, simplicity alone are virtues so charming that even the most hardened of sinners is held captive by their sheer goodness. What a noted English convert has said about saints might equally as well have been said about children. "Saints," writes Arnold Lunn, "keep alive a deep respect for piety even among the impious." There is nothing quite so convincing as the virtue of a little child—simply because it is so unmistakably genuine. The hold which the little ones have on the Heart of God is something the most imaginative of us can never conceive.

Nor does this love of children date, as some might suspect, from the time of Christ. Way back in the days of the Old Dispensation saints were loving and recognizing the beauty of a child's soul just as they are today. Speaking of *the Child* among children Isaias says: "For a CHILD IS BORN to us, and a son is given to us, and the gov-

ernment is upon his shoulders; and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, God the Mighty, the Father of the world to come, the Prince of Peace."<sup>1</sup> Reading, for example, the entire Book of Isaias, one is struck by the many references "the great prophet" makes to children and to child life. Some of the best known texts of Scripture are taken from this prophet and not a few of them refer to the little ones. There is, for example, the tender: "Can a woman forget her infant, so as not to have pity on the son of her womb? and if she should forget, yet will not I forget thee."<sup>2</sup> Or the beautifully prophetic: "And a little child shall lead them."<sup>3</sup>

But to return to the New Dispensation and lovable Philip Neri. This irrepressible Patron of the Eternal City had a particular and a powerful attraction for the young. He delighted in leading groups of them on expeditions to the hills outside Rome. Some days it would be a group of Dominican Novices; on others it would be a gathering of his little non-clerical friends. It was Fra Phillipe who organized their games, took part in them; and then when things were going smoothly he would quietly slip away to the shade and comparative solitude of a nearby tree there to meditate on the Passion of Our Lord. If the boys called him, the good Father would leave his prayers and join their play. His Cardinal biographer says of him: "He would leave his meditation or anything else if his boys wanted to have him among them." It reminds one of the charity of Saint Thomas Aquinas who began one of his letters: "Tonight I have given up my prayer in order to write to you."

Not so very far from Rome in a little village near Turin, Philip Neri found his rival in one Don John Bosco, who has been called, "The First Friend of Modern Youth." The keen, cool breezes sweep down from the towering Alps on the wide plains of Piedmont but they never managed to chill the ardor of Don Bosco's love for the young. This love of his took a practical turn, and today as a result we have some nine thousand men working in approximately seven hundred houses and institutions mainly for the physical, intellectual and spiritual welfare of boys.

It all started when an officious sacristan struck a young lad in Don Bosco's presence.

"What are you beating that boy for?" asked Father John. "What harm has he done? I forbid you to treat my friends like that."

"Your friends?"

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<sup>1</sup> *Isaias*, ix, 6.

<sup>2</sup> *Isaias*, xlix, 15.

<sup>3</sup> *Isaias*, ix, 6.

"All children are my friends, especially beaten children."

The following Sunday Don Bosco's little friend was back to see him, bringing along several of his companions. He came again and again, and each time there were new faces. Some of them were out and out rough-necks, but no matter—in fact, so much the better could they use his kindness. Soon there were twenty, then thirty, then a hundred. Their first meetings were held in a small room; then they moved to a chapel. The din was frightful. More than once the neighbors complained so vigorously that Bosco and his boys were forced to move. There were even those who seeing his love for unlovable and unloved children whispered that the humble priest was "crazy"; and at one time definite but unavailing steps were taken to put him in an asylum.

The rest of Don Bosco's story can be told very briefly in terms of brick and the Salesian Order. He saw the need of houses for the ever increasing number of his boys, so he promptly put up buildings out of God knows what; he saw too, the need of men to take care of his boys so he founded the Salesian Order in spite of God knows what. And all this because Don Bosco saw in children, souls infinitely dear to the heart of God. Lest the members of the weaker sex should feel neglected it should be noted that Don Bosco helped to establish for the benefit of girls the Congregation of Mary Help of Christians.

Preceding Don Bosco and following him, we find two saints who were not so much lovers of children as they were out and out children themselves. Writing of these two in a recent article, Ronald Knox has this to say: "If ever two saints were like children, preferred to be like children, gloried in being like children, they were Saint Francis and the Little Flower." The Little Man of Assisi and the Little Flower of Lisieux went through life as joyous and as happy as the gladdest of children. When their time came to die, both of them, children to the end, were singing—one figuratively, the other literally. "I suffer much," said Theresa as she was about to leave this life, "but I am in astonishing peace. I am full of confidence." Over in the loveliness of Umbria when the other child came to die, Brother Elias had to rebuke him for actually singing on his deathbed! "He ought rather to be thinking of death," complained the good Brother. That, of course, was exactly why Francis was singing—and Theresa too. They were two little children out for the day merrily returning home to see their Father.

The word "merrily" brings to mind the recently canonized St. Thomas More, the one time "darling of England" and a man who, to use his own expression, "could lose his head and come to no harm."

His happy, joke-loving disposition proclaims him at once as a lover of children. Twice married, the father of a large family, it is said that his household resembled a nursery full of happy children. With all the cares and affairs of state, with all the troubles of Tudor England on his hands he always found time to attend personally to the supervision of his family. In the days when he enjoyed the royal favor, Henry's cheerful Chancellor used often to slip away for a day or two with Lady Alice and the children at Chelsea. Many were the times he was missed and summarily recalled to the royal presence. The love which Thomas More had for all his children, especially for his favorite, "Meg" (the Margaret Roper of later days) was truly lyric in its tenderness and beauty. The children loved him in return and consequently imbibed not a little of their Father's piety and scholarliness. Their home was, as Erasmus put it, "a school for the knowledge and practice of the Christian Faith."

At the opening of the twentieth century we find on the Throne of the Fisherman one of the greatest friends of children that ever lived. Isaias, Philip Neri, Francis and Theresa gave them their hearts; Don Bosco gave them buildings, institutions, education; all the saints gave them their love; but it remained for one Giuseppe Sarto, better known to all the world as Pius the Tenth, to give them God Himself. As he looks down now from "the nurseries of Heaven" (where Father Feeney consigns him) he must be happy in knowing that he has justly earned the love and gratitude of countless boys and girls into whose spotless lives he has introduced the Divine Playmate. Others there were who had allowed them (in the Sacrament of Penance) to receive the grace of God but Giuseppe Sarto it was who gave them the God of grace.

There remains, of course, the Saints of saints who was also the Child among children. He came into this world a tiny Babe, mothered by the sweetest, the loveliest creature God ever fashioned. "And she brought forth her first-born son, and wrapped him up in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn."<sup>4</sup> He grew up, this Child of Mary's, just the same as any other child. But when He became a man He never forgot He had once been a child. He insisted on telling those who had forgotten their childhood that "Unless you be converted, and become as little children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven."<sup>5</sup> That was God's way of coming to man, just as it is man's way of going to God.

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<sup>4</sup> *Luke*, ii, 6-7.

<sup>5</sup> *Matt.*, xviii, 3.

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## HOLLY WREATH

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PHILIP HYLAND, O.P.

I wondered long. So strange it seemed  
This church upon a hillside's wooded breast  
Should show no holly wreath on Christmas morn!

The old priest heard me ask; then beamed  
And pointed to the crib. "I thought it best.  
The holly might remind Him of the thorn."